

### **Is cosmetic tail surgery in dogs ethical?**

As tail docking bans are sweeping Europe, Australia, and South Africa, the United States is facing increased scrutiny on whether or not the procedure should be permitted. Many European countries are reestablishing breed standards to allow dogs of natural composition to be shown, unlike most major U.S. shows. The American Kennel Club is steadfast with its position on docking in certain breed standards, believing that it defines and preserves the character of the breed and can enhance good health (AKC, 2008). With countries around the world banning or regulating the procedure, it may be surprising that within the U.S., Maryland and Pennsylvania are currently the only states making progress with placing restrictions on docking specifically in dogs (AVMA, 2014).

Maryland's Senate and House have approved Senate Bill 659 stating that only veterinarians are lawfully allowed to perform a docking procedure. The bill further states that anesthesia should be used, but only when appropriate (MDVMA, 2014). This bill's use of the word "appropriate" is vague because "appropriate" justifications are not specified. Presumably, it is referring to the risk that anesthesia may reduce vigor when used in neonatal puppies (Snyder and Johnson, 2015). Pennsylvania's law, PA C.S.S 5511, is specific in that it has banned docking in dogs over five days old, although it allows veterinarians to dock an anesthetized dog if it is over 12 weeks old. Between the period of five days and 12 weeks, tail docking may only occur if a veterinarian concludes that it is medically necessary for the well-being of the dog. The veterinarian must also perform the surgery in this time

period (PSPCA, 2012). This law is more specific than Maryland's, but allows anyone to dock a neonatal dog.

The biggest battle concerning tail docking takes place between breeders and veterinarians. A survey (Noonan et al., 1996a) in Queensland sampled the opinions of 100 breeders and 100 veterinarians on their stance, with 84% of breeders supporting docking and 83% of veterinarians opposing it. Breeders and show handlers aren't the only ones in support of the procedure, though. Many dog owners, particularly farmers and hunters, utilize docked breeds and stand by the tradition for various supposed practical reasons. The consequences of docking will be weighed against the benefits to determine if it is a justified procedure.

#### *Pain and Complications*

Arguments in favor of tail docking often claim that neonatal puppies do not have fully developed nervous systems, and, therefore, experience minimal to no pain. Many still believe that animals of any age are not capable of experiencing pain as humans do, which is, of course, false. Higher brain centers, neural transmitters, pathways, and receptors are anatomically and physiologically the same among mammals (Wansbrough, 1996). Although a neonate is not a fully developed mammal, the immaturity is thought to merely slow down the pain reaction, not eliminate it (Beauchamp et al., 2008).

A study was conducted by Noonan et al. (1996b) observing the behavior of 50 puppies (Rottweilers, Dobermans, and Bouviers) three to five days old during docking. The procedure was standard, restraining the puppies to restrict movement instead of anesthetizing. Surgical scissors of appropriate length per breed were used to dock,

followed by a suture at the stump for even healing, and application of potassium permanganate to minimize bleeding. Behaviors being observed were shrieks, whimpers, locomotion, and sleep. Prior to the procedure and during restraint, the majority of the puppies showed signs of distress with struggling and whimpers. Every pup vocalized during the procedure (majority being shrieks with some whimpers), followed by many whimpering and pacing until almost all fell asleep at slightly over two minutes. The longest time until quiescence was 15 minutes. Although the pain appeared to be short-lived, it was significant and stressful for the puppies.

The possibility of post-operative complications occurring is another consequence to consider. 43 practices made up of a combination of breeders and veterinarians in Southwest Nigeria (Fademyi et al., 2014) showed that infection and or necrosis occurred in 37.2% of dogs receiving docks, while self-mutilation occurred in 20.9% of dogs. The majority of these dogs were being docked at two to three weeks of age, qualifying them as neonatal. Some other potential post-operative complications that have been seen are hemorrhage, meningitis, and neuromas at the amputation site, some of which can induce shock and or fatality in a neonatal puppy (Wansbrough, 1996).

#### *Chronic Health Problems*

The degeneration of pelvic muscles and tail muscles is the most significant chronic health problem arising from docking, although it is not common (Bennett et al., 2003). There is also the issue of lack of muscle development in the tail and pelvic region because the tail was removed from a neonatal puppy. With the severing of the musculature along

the vertebrae and the decrease in weight that the vertebrae was meant to bear, muscles don't reach their full potential (Wansbrough, 1996).

Pelvic and tail muscle degeneration is not only an issue in itself, but has the ability to spiral into additional health problems. Acquired urinary incontinence and fecal incontinence are two examples of what weakened pelvic and tail muscles can cause. The levator ani and coccygeus muscles of females are integral to their pelvic floor and are attached to the tail base. Docking can potentially cause these muscles to degenerate, weakening the pelvic floor and causing urinary incontinence (Holt and Thrusfield, 1993). In regards to fecal incontinence, tail movement during defecation directly influences the success of anal canal evacuation. There is also a decrease in support and weight of the rectum and anus that could affect defecation (Wansbrough, 1996).

### *Communication and Behavior*

It is fairly common knowledge that when a dog is loosely wagging its tail, it is happy, and when the tail is tucked between its legs, it can mean fear. With a docked tail, these easily identifiable behavioral cues go away. A life-size remote-controlled dog replica was used by Leaver and Reimchen (2007) for a study in canine behavioral responses. They used a replica with a full tail, and one with a docked tail for comparison. Dogs approached the replica with the long wagging tail more often than that of the long still tail, but responded equally to the replica with the short tail, regardless of if it was wagging or still. This indicates that intraspecies communication is hindered by the lack of tail. In fact, Fadeyemi et al. (2014) recorded an 8.3% increase in aggression and a 5.4% increase in attacks by

other dogs after docking, postulating that lack of communication tails often provide was the cause.

### *Prevention of Injury*

Diesel et al. (2010) recorded tail injuries occurring in one year focusing on 52 veterinary practices in Great Britain. Of the population of 138,212 dogs attending these practices, 281 tail injuries were recorded. 17.5% of these injuries were outdoor related (undergrowth, fence, and work injuries). The authors also stated that docked dogs were significantly less likely to sustain a tail injury, although statistically 500 dogs would need to be docked to prevent a single tail injury. It should be noted that 36% of the 281 injuries occurred in the home, often due to owner negligence (i.e. door closing on tail or owner stepping on tail).

Dogs involved in herding and hunting are most associated with tail docking because farmers and hunters believe that the surgery can prevent future injuries that outweigh the acute pain experienced during the docking procedure. Herding dogs with long tails run the risk of livestock trampling on them, while hunting dogs often wade through thick foliage that can snag the tail. The Cameron et al. (2014) study states that working breeds are 1.7 times more likely to receive a minimum of one injury examined by a veterinarian than non-working breeds. They also found that Spaniels had 2.3 times more tail injuries in 2009 when Scotland enforced the ban on tail docking, than in 2007. In other words, Spaniels that were traditionally docked had the procedure foregone, leaving them with long tails susceptible to the elements.

In Scotland, during the 2010-11 shooting season, a survey was conducted (Lederer et al., 2014) to determine the prevalence of tail injuries in dogs partaking. 2,860 dogs were recorded, with 13.5% sustaining tail injuries. Of those injuries, undocked Spaniels and Hunt Point Retrievers made up 95.1% of them, which is significant because they are traditionally docked breeds. Contrasting with the Diesel et al. (2010) study, Lederer et al. (2014) determined that two to 18 Spaniels or Hunt Point Retrievers would need to be docked to prevent one tail injury.

There is also a belief that tail docking of dogs with narrow tails and short fur helps prevent future tail injuries caused by incessant tail wagging (Bennett, 2003), colloquially referred to as “happy tail”. Great Danes, for example, naturally have long, narrow tails and if one were to exuberantly wag in a narrow kennel, hitting walls, the tail tip could split open and bleed. This is inconsistent, though, since many thin-tailed, short-haired dogs are not docked (i.e. Dalmatians). It should be noted that a superficial tail split is often more of a mess than a physical pain, because blood tends to spread with each tail wag when the tail has been split causing a violent visual, but the dog will continue to wag happily or excitedly, unhindered.

### *Tradition and Preference*

Docking is not a new practice. It is believed to have begun around 2,000 years ago, with such reasons as taxes on dogs with tails, the myth that it strengthened the back and prevented rabies, and many others. These reasons were eventually revised or debunked, but breed standards were born (Fox, 2010). Buyers of purebred dogs have a specific look in mind, often seeking a “traditional” dog. Breeders want to supply what buyers want even if

buyers are unaware of the procedures required to achieve such looks. U.S. breeders are also required to comply with AKC standards if they want to register their dogs and show them at AKC dog shows. If breeders do not conform, they significantly reduce their exposure and rank.

Dogs are often docked for hygienic reasons as well, which would fall under personal preference. Poodles, Old English Sheepdogs, and certain terriers are examples of breeds that are frequently docked for cleanliness. Their fur is thick and long and has a greater potential to be soiled, especially by fecal matter, and docking would reduce the grooming required by the owner (Wansbrough, 1996). This reasoning is inconsistent because there are many long-coated breeds that are not docked, for example, Bearded Collies and Havanese. Clipping fur is another option that avoids surgery and allows the dog to remain in natural form. Potential dog owners could also simply select a breed with shorter fur instead of altering a long-haired one.

After examination of many viewpoints on the issue of tail docking, it appears that those opposed to the procedure have more empirical evidence to support their stance than those in favor. Docking is commonly done in neonatal puppies because it is believed by some that they do not experience pain at such a young age, but this has been proven false. There are a number of health complications associated with the procedure that could affect quality of life more significantly than a potential tail injury later in life if the dog were to remain tailed. Health issues are not the only problem, though. Canine communication can be negatively affected by a lack of tail to both humans and other dogs. When a dog has no tail, witnesses have to rely on other behavioral cues which oftentimes aren't as obvious.

For example, a nervous flick of the tongue is harder to see than a tucked tail. The only dogs that may experience some benefit from a docked tail are those that hunt in dense foliage or herd livestock, but the number of tail injuries among these dogs is still so small, that it's hard to justify a standard of docking among all who partake in these activities. With that being said, more tail injuries come from human negligence, such as closing doors on tails, than hunting or herding, so many injuries being used in the case to justify docking could be prevented by owners paying more attention to their animals. The fact that most veterinarians, who are held by an oath to protect animal health and welfare, are opposed to the practice should indicate that docking has reached its expiration date.

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